

Patriarchal Norms and Divine Retribution: A Gender-Based Analysis of Sin and Punishment in the *Arda Viraf Nameh*

Niloofar Taherian

Department of Human Sciences, Golestan University,

Golestan, Iran

Abstract

The *Arda Viraf Nameh*, an influential Zoroastrian text from the Sasanian era, vividly depicts the afterlife punishments awaiting sinners for transgressions against societal and religious norms. Through its detailed depictions of female suffering in hell, the text reveals the patriarchal values that shaped Sasanian society, where women's roles were strictly defined and regulated to preserve family honor and uphold community standards. By presenting cautionary narratives that reinforce these gendered expectations, the *Arda Viraf Nameh* serves not only as a religious guide but as a reflection of the era's social framework, emphasizing the constrained position of women within a patriarchal culture. This study explores the cultural and moral implications embedded within the text, shedding light on the social dynamics that governed women's lives and their prescribed roles in Sasanian Persia.

Key Terms: *Arda Viraf Nameh*, Zoroastrianism, Sasanian era, gender roles, patriarchal Norms

1. Introduction

The *Arda Viraf Nameh*, also known as the *Book of Arda Viraf*, is a significant Zoroastrian religious text that provides a vivid account of the afterlife as experienced by the priest Arda Viraf. Written in Middle Persian, this narrative depicts the journey of the soul through heaven and hell, offering a detailed portrayal of moral judgment in this religion. The text serves as both a spiritual guide and a reinforcement of the Zoroastrian emphasis on the moral dichotomy between good and evil. It also provides believers with a moral framework and underscores the eternal consequences of their earthly deeds.

The *Arda Viraf Nameh* holds significant importance not only within Zoroastrian tradition but also in the broader context of religious and visionary literature. As one of the earliest known depictions of a soul's journey through the afterlife, it has likely influenced later works that explore similar themes, such as Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy*. Moreover, the vivid portrayal of heaven and hell in the *Arda Viraf Nameh* established a literary tradition of moral allegory that can be traced in various cultures and religious texts across the globe. Its emphasis on divine justice, the moral consequences of human actions, and detailed afterlife punishments has resonated beyond Zoroastrianism, contributing to the global understanding of eschatology (Talattof 8).

Furthermore, as one of the earliest and most detailed accounts of the afterlife, the *Arda Viraf Nameh* provides valuable insights into Zoroastrian cosmology, moral beliefs, and philosophy. Therefore, exploring the themes of sin and punishment through a gendered lens reveals underlying societal assumptions about the roles and responsibilities of men and women in Zoroastrian culture. By analyzing the differences in how sins are categorized and punished based on gender, a deeper cultural understanding about the roles of women and men in Zoroastrian society can be uncovered. This gendered analysis opens up important discussions about how religious texts shape and reflect social hierarchies and influence societal norms.

2. Exploring Sin and Punishment in the *Arda Viraf Nameh*

Written during the Sasanian Empire, the *Arda Viraf Nameh* reflects a significant period in Zoroastrian thought. It was written during a time when Zoroastrian leaders sought to strengthen

the faith and standardize religious practices in response to outside influences, such as Islamic ideas. In this context, it serves as a guide for moral behavior, stressing the importance of following Zoroastrian principles. Zoroastrianism emphasizes the constant battle between good and evil, represented by Ahura Mazda (or Ohrmazd, the good god) and Angra Mainyu (or Ahriman, the evil spirit). A key belief in Zoroastrianism is that everyone will face a final judgment based on their actions, which determines whether they go to heaven or hell. The *Arda Viraf Nameh* illustrates this idea by describing Arda Viraf's journey as he navigates the afterlife.

The narrative begins with Arda Viraf, a pious man chosen by the Zoroastrian priesthood for a unique mission: to travel through the realms of the afterlife and return to share his insights with the living. He begins his journey after consuming a special potion prepared by the priests, which grants him the ability to transcend the physical world and enter the spiritual realm. He first encounters celestial beings as his guide, leading him through various levels of existence:

In that first night, Srosh the pious and Adar the angel came to meet me,
 and they bowed to me, and spoke
 thus: "Be thou welcome, Arda Viraf, although thou hast come when it is not thy time."
 I said: "I am a messenger."
 And then the victorious Srosh the pious, and Adar the angel, took hold of my hand.
 Taking the first footstep with the good thought, and the second footstep with the good
 word, and the third footstep with the good deed... (*The Book of Arda Viraf*, Chapter 12)

As he navigates through the different realms, Arda Viraf meets the souls of both the virtuous and the sinful. In the heavenly realms, he sees the blissful existence of the righteous, who are rewarded for their good deeds, kindness, and adherence to Zoroastrian teachings. Their experiences are marked by joy, light, and communion with divine beings, emphasizing the benefits of a life lived in accordance with moral principles. Conversely, in the realms of punishment, Arda Viraf witnesses the suffering of those who have committed sins, particularly those related to falsehood, greed, and injustice. The text emphasizes that each individual is judged based on their deeds, reinforcing the Zoroastrian belief in personal accountability and the importance of ethical behavior (Bahrami and Hojati najafabadi 86).

And they performed the Yazishn and Dron ceremonies, and the praise and services of God;
 and they performed the rites and praises of the angels of the heavenly existences, and the angels of the earthly existences;
 and they practiced acquiescence and conformity, reverence and obedience to their husbands and lords;
 and they were without doubts on the religion of the Mazdayasnians.
 They were diligent in doing of good works,
 and they have been abstainers from sin.”
 And it seemed to me sublime. (*The Book of Arda Viraf*, Chapter 13)

These women honored the elements revered in Zoroastrianism _water, fire, earth, plants, and animals viewed as sacred creations of Ohrmazd. By respecting these elements, the women embodied the values of Zoroastrian spirituality. They also performed important Zoroastrian ceremonies, such as the Yazishn and Dron, which involved offerings and prayers to the divine. Their religious practices extended to honoring both heavenly and earthly angels, emphasizing their commitment to a holistic reverence for all aspects of creation. Furthermore, these women showed respect, obedience, and complete loyalty to their husbands. This exemplary behavior, blending spiritual and social duties, elevates their status in the afterlife (Bahrami and Hojati najafabadi 86).

This brief portrayal contrasts sharply with the extensive, vivid descriptions of women in hell, where the text delves into their sins and punishments with alarming detail. Sins like infidelity, neglect of household duties, and defiance of marital expectations are recounted in detail, accompanied by brutal punishments involving physical torture, mutilation, and suffering. The stark difference between the limited mention of women in heaven and the extensive portrayal of women in hell reflects cultural attitudes toward gender and morality. In this way, the text offers a disturbing commentary on how women are perceived and treated within the moral framework of the narrative (Taheri and Shahpir 111).

Generally, the sins committed by women can be categorized into three distinct groups. The first group encompasses sins related to feminine practices and responsibilities, particularly

those that involve ritual purity and the observance of prohibitions during menstruation. The second group focuses on familial responsibilities, emphasizing the moral obligations women have toward their children and husbands, such as hurting their husbands with sharp words, committing adultery, neglecting their children, or terminating a pregnancy. This category illustrates the severe consequences that arise from neglecting maternal duties or betraying marital fidelity, reflecting the societal values that prioritize family stability. Finally, the third group addresses sins tied to social and religious duties, demonstrating the importance of adhering to community standards and rituals that foster social harmony. Examples in this category include using makeup excessively, practicing sorcery, manufacturing narcotics, or offending sacred elements.

The first category includes sins specific to feminine practices and responsibilities, such as failing to observe certain prohibitions during menstruation. For instance, a woman is depicted as suffering by being forced to consume cup after cup of the impurity and filth of men. Srosh the pious and Adar the angel explain that this woman is punished for failing to observe ritual prohibitions during her menstruation. Rather than abstaining, she approached water and fire, a violation regarded a serious wrongdoing:

I came to a place, and I saw the soul of a woman,
 to whom they ever gave to eat cup after cup of the impurity and filth of men.
 And I asked thus: “What sin was committed by this body, whose soul suffers suchl a
 punishment?”
 Srosh the pious, and Adar the angel, said
 thus: “This is the soul of that wicked woman who, having not abstained, nor lawfully
 withheld herself, approached water and fire during her menstruation.” (*The Book of Arda
 Viraf*, Chapter 20)

The second category of sins involves transgressions related to familial responsibilities, specifically those a woman has toward her children and, particularly her husband. This category underscores the cultural and moral expectations placed upon women to fulfill specific roles within the family structure. Sins in this group include neglecting maternal duties, such as providing milk to one's infant, as well as actions that disrupt the marital bond, like showing

defiance or failing in loyalty to one's husband. These sins are depicted as serious violations, reflecting the broader societal values surrounding family obligations and the consequences of failing to uphold these roles (Soltani 148).

For instance, sins involving adultery and infidelity are portrayed with particular severity, emphasized by repeated references across several chapters, each accompanied by distinct punishments of escalating cruelty. In Chapter 24, a woman guilty of infidelity is depicted as suspended by her breasts in hell, while poisonous creatures called khrafstars consume her entire body, symbolizing the extreme suffering inflicted as a consequence of betrayal:

I also saw the soul of a woman
 who was suspended, by the breasts, to hell;
 and its noxious creatures (khrafstars) seized her whole body.
 And I asked thus: 'What sin was committed by this body, whose soul suffers such a
 punishment?'
 Srosh the pious, and Adar the angel, said
 thus: "This is the soul of that wicked woman who, in the world, left her own husband,
 and gave herself to other men, and committed adultery" (*The Book of Arda Viraf*,
 Chapter 24)

Similarly, in Chapter 62, another unfaithful woman continually claws her breasts with an iron comb for breaking the marital bond. In another chapter, a woman who bore a child from an illicit relationship is subject to a disturbing punishment: she wanders endlessly, her face and head wounded by her own hand, as hail falls upon her and molten brass streams beneath her feet. Her torment is intensified by the haunting cries of an infant, which she can neither escape nor soothe. Another woman who left her husband to be with other men faces a punishment where she is thrown headfirst, and an iron-spiked object, like a hedgehog, is forced into her body. These brutal images highlight the serious consequences of marital betrayal.

Sins related to motherhood carry similarly harsh punishments, emphasizing the weight placed on women's responsibilities toward their children. For instance, women who neglected or denied milk to their infants suffer uniquely severe torment. One such woman is described as

endlessly scraping her body with an iron comb and digging a hill with her breasts in a futile attempt to reach her child:

Then I saw the soul of a woman
 who ever scraped her own body and face with an iron comb,
 and ever dug an iron hill with her breasts.
 And I asked thus: “What sin was committed by this woman?”
 Srosh the pious, and Adar the angel, said
 thus: “This is the soul of that wicked woman who, in the world, committed a crime,
 and through a desire for wealth, gave no milk to her own infant.
 And now she ever makes an outcry thus: ‘Here let me dig into this hill, that I may give
 milk to that infant.’
 Yet until the reestablishment of the world [Frashegird], she does not reach the infant.”
 (*The Book of Arda Viraf*, Chapter 87)

Another punishment involves women placing their own breasts on a hot frying pan, moving them back and forth in agony, punished for refusing their milk to their own infants while selling it to others for personal gain. These portrayals underscore a deep cultural condemnation of failing maternal obligations, reinforcing the idea that nurturing one’s child is an inescapable moral duty.

The third category encompasses sins tied to social and religious duties expected of women. These include failing to adhere to cultural or spiritual practices, especially those that maintain purity and respect within the community. For example, in chapter 84, the text describes the severe punishment of a woman who manufactured and distributed harmful substances. Her punishment involves her breasts being cut off, her belly torn, and her intestines fed to dogs. This gruesome imagery emphasizes the serious consequences of her actions. When Srosh the pious and Adar the angel explain her fate, they reveal that she was wicked because she created and kept narcotics for others to consume, showcasing the devastating impact of her choices on the health and safety of her community.

Additionally, chapter 37 mentions the souls of both men and women who are punished for neglecting their responsibilities toward essential elements like water and fire. These

Their punishment underscores the importance of caring for these sacred elements and upholding religious duties, reinforcing the message that failure to meet these obligations can lead to dire consequences (Jafari Dehkordi et al. 73).

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pressures that governed women's lives in this historical context. These narratives reveal the intertwining of gender, morality, and societal expectations, illustrating how deeply ingrained patriarchal norms shape perceptions of female virtue and transgression. Through these graphic depictions, the *Arda Viraf Nameh* conveys a profound cautionary message, urging women to conform to societal norms to avoid dire consequences, thereby reinforcing the rigid structures that define their existence in the Sasanian world.

3. Conclusion

In conclusion, the *Arda Viraf Nameh* offers a powerful reflection on the Sasanian cultural and moral framework that defined women's roles and responsibilities. Through its vivid depictions of hellish punishments for specific sins, the text conveys the societal expectations placed upon women and the severe consequences of deviating from these norms. These punishments _focused on transgressions tied to feminine practices, familial responsibilities, and social and religious duties_ underscore the patriarchal structure that held women responsible for upholding communal standards and family honor. The emphasis on women's sins, ranging from menstruation practices to fidelity and motherhood, illustrates the degree to which personal conduct was intertwined with broader social stability.

The *Arda Viraf Nameh* serves not only as a religious text but also as a commentary on the underlying values and social structures of its time, revealing the ways in which patriarchal norms governed and constrained women's lives in this era. The text's vivid portrayals of punishment and sin demonstrate a deeply ingrained system of expectations placed upon women to uphold family honor, perform ritual duties, and embody purity. Through these cautionary tales, the text reinforces the weight of these expectations, offering a window into the historical dynamics that shaped gender roles and moral conduct.

In essence, the *Arda Viraf Nameh* reveals how religious doctrines and societal norms intertwined to shape and enforce strict gender roles, ultimately serving as both a reflection and reinforcement of the patriarchal values that defined Sasanian society. Through its graphic portrayals and moral narratives, the text offers a valuable historical lens into how deeply embedded these expectations were, framing women's adherence to social and religious duties as

essential to maintaining communal order. The text thus stands as a powerful testament to the ways in which gendered ideologies and cultural structures have historically been used to uphold broader systems of control and morality.

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